

# CONVERSATIO MORUM

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*Thoughts for a Monday Morning*

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## IMPERATIVES OF CHARITY

*Soren Johnson*

Imagine for a moment: A young man has asked the love of his life for her hand in marriage. She has accepted. All is happiness, joy. In the lead-up to the wedding, the man has only to introduce his fiancée to his sprawling family at a reunion—where she will glimpse this family’s share of happiness alongside its stew of long-standing misgivings, complacency, standoffishness and prejudice.<sup>i</sup>

Imagine the young man as he escorts his fiancée into the midst of those who will in fact be—for the rest of her life with him, “till death do us part”—her new family.

It is a daunting moment—and one which all too often meets and undercuts the “fresh power of the Gospel.”<sup>ii</sup> From the joy of transformative first encounters in which we share the love of Christ, we invite others into the boisterous ecclesial landscape of our extended family. We hope that they stay and discover further the joy and love which we know this family experiences in its finer moments, and yet deep down, we understand why their initial fervor may flag.

No wonder the trials of this “family life” lead us to adopt smug attitudes —from defeatism and false irenicism to “certain refusals to forgive,” “a certain pride,” and “an unevangelical insistence on condemning the ‘other side’.”<sup>iii</sup>

Unity seems beyond our reach. Sure, it would be nice, but faced with so many challenges—so much to do!—isn’t the pursuit of and prayer for this unity really just a “luxury” for which I as a Christian have neither the time nor patience?

The answer—the imperative of the truth and charity we profess—must be “No.”

“How indeed,” wrote John Paul II in “That They May Be One,” his extended meditation on Christian unity, “can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians?”<sup>iv</sup>

How indeed, especially in light of Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity in Gethsemane—where He prayed that “all may be one...as we are one”?<sup>v</sup> His prayer, after all, implies “a certain likeness between the union of Divine Persons, and the union of God’s children in truth and charity”?<sup>vi</sup>

If the unity to which we are called as disciples is to mirror that of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then we would do well to undertake a regular “examination of conscience” to chart our progress on this long road. To that end, I suggest four areas for reflection based on “That They May Be One”:

- “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit”; our “hope does not disappoint us.”<sup>vii</sup>

Does the “hope that does not disappoint” characterize our joint witness with other Christians?

- “[O]ur contemplation of the ‘mighty works of God’ (*mirabilia Dei*) has been enriched by new horizons....the knowledge that the Spirit is at work in other Christian Communities, the examples of holiness...and contact with unexpected dimensions of Christian commitment.”<sup>viii</sup>

Are we thankful for and inspired by the “mighty works of God” in Christian traditions besides our own?

- “If Christians, despite their divisions, can grow ever more united in common prayer around Christ, they will grow in the awareness of how little divides them in comparison to what unites them.”<sup>ix</sup>

Are we praying regularly with Christians of other traditions?

- “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’....When undertaking dialogue, each side must presuppose in the other a desire for reconciliation, for unity in truth.”<sup>x</sup>

Do we talk with other Christians in a spirit of goodwill, charity and reconciliation?

Hope, gratitude, prayer and a desire for reconciliation: here are four imperatives of the Good News we profess. Without them, our family reunions will be flat and joyless affairs with little appeal to those in search of Jesus Christ. With them, the world will be drawn to the irresistible beauty of reconciliation and transformation.

May others find in our reunions—our united action and joint witness in every arena of society—communities of restoration and care which reveal the face of Christ and manifest His prayer “that all may be one.”<sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. John Paul’s description of attitudes which at times characterize relations among Christians, “That They May Be One (*Ut Unum Sint*)”, 2.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, 2,

<sup>iii</sup> Cf., John Paul’s description of attitudes which can impede reconciliation among Christians, *Ut Unum Sint*, 15, 79.

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<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>v</sup> Jn. 17:21

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 27.

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 5:5

<sup>viii</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, 15.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 29.

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. “[U]nited action in society on the part of Christians,” wrote John Paul, “has the clear value of a joint witness to the name of the Lord. It is also a form of proclamation, since it reveals the face of Christ” (*Ibid.*, 75).

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